‘Good Liturgy’: does it involve more than ‘what I like’?

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The liturgy is the great school of discipleship: there the kerugma is not only heard but embraced, our identity with the Christ is affirmed, and our hope given expression. However, liturgy is not an abstract essence but an artefact of many people with differing backgrounds, appreciations of what they are doing, and, indeed, widely varying levels of ritual skill. Liturgy can range from a mere token affair imagined as the acting out pre-scripted texts to occasions that can be events of human poetry and moments of the Spirit’s presence. This link between mission and our celebrations’ perceptible quality was well expressed in 1972 by the U.S. Bishops:

> Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations weaken and destroy faith. To celebrate the liturgy means to do the action or perform the sign in such a way that the full meaning and impact shine forth in clear and compelling fashion.

These statements have become maxims, while the general truth is known to all engaged in mission who have probed into what lead some to embrace Christianity and other to abandon it. Liturgy matters!

But how should we assess a ‘good liturgy’ and what are the characteristics of ‘poor celebrations’? Moreover, the steady fall in attendance at liturgy suggests that *part of the problem* lies in people judging liturgy as failing. So, if liturgy is important, we need to give thought to what constitutes good liturgy and how we distinguish good from poor celebrations.

One route is to adopt the now famous method developed by Dieter Rams for assessing successful designs. Rams used a set of discerned principles that can be used as ‘rules of thumb’ in the production of other designs, incorporating the insights of others’ success. A set of principles for good liturgy might look something like what follows.

*I. Good liturgy is honest.*

Because we imagine our liturgy taking place in the court of heaven (Heb 9:24) we should seek the greatest authenticity in what we do in a world of signs so that, at the very least, it is self-consistent and strives to be consistent with all that we preach. So, minimally, we should seek to remove dissonance between what we say and what we do. But the liturgy is frequently dissonant between its words and the message received: the result is a situation whereby it appears to be *just* words – words that mean little and sound simply as a clerical rig-ma-roll. There are so many examples of such dissonance in the contemporary Roman liturgy that I suspect it is one of the great, deep-level, reforms that we need to address. Just consider this small detail: we say ‘he broke it’ but use unbroken individual wavers … … … what we say and what we do in ritual are not in alignment. Yet lacking this simple level of coherence in the visible objects of our liturgy, we are

called upon to assume that there is a coherence between the liturgy and our own endeavours as disciples.

When the directness between our ritual words and actions breaks down – as it is both prone to – we end up with an infinite regress of signs: signs to signs to signs … . A pursuit of honesty between the varieties of our signs must be a primary quality of liturgy. We might recall that it is precisely a dissonance between symbols and intentions that the gospel narrator expects will shock his audience at the arrest of Jesus when a kiss is used by the traitor as his identifying sign (Mk 14:44). In a word: good liturgy should do what is says and say what it does.

*II. Good liturgy is joyful*.

Even in the depths of our sadness (at a funeral) or recollection (recalling Jesus' passion) we are a people of hope: the day of recalling the passion and death of Jesus is *Good* Friday. Our belief is in salvation, redemption, and the victory of love and life over death and dissolution. Any liturgy that does not manifest this is unworthy of being a product of our coming together in God's presence. This means that our liturgies must reflect a tension inherent in Christian discipleship: we take suffering seriously and we acknowledge openly loss and sadness, but 'our hope is rich in immortality.' Even on the grimmest occasion, we must remind ourselves of our joy. But, more commonly, in our day-to-day liturgy there needs to be the lightness of those whose religion is not a future 'great crunch' but the eschatological banquet.

There is a suspicion of joyful liturgy in many in the mainstream churches: they do things in a serious, dull way. Solemnity often means heaviness, elaborate ceremonial, and grandeur. But while this may reflect a human sense of the important as the BIG and **bold**, it may not be true to the smallness of the incarnation. Liturgy must somehow recall that Jesus was seen as announcing a joyful festival (Lk 4:17) and his disciples imagined not only their liturgy but their Way as a feast.

*III. Good liturgy celebrates community*.

We have a tradition of seeing the liturgy as action served / administered by a minority of ritual specialists to a generality of people (or which is carried out by a priesthood on their behalf). But good liturgy must involve *all* in single activity: this is Vatican II's 'active participation.' All must have a sense that they – as the People of God – are doing something to celebrate their faith in Jesus and, with him, that they are offering prayer to the Father. If the liturgy is seen in terms of the work of just a few, or as a matter of individual sanctity, it has become a commodity.

A quality of good liturgy is that it challenges consumerist individualism; and projects a different view of human action and society. We need but think of Paul's comments on the selfishness of the Corinthian gatherings: we are there to share with one another in Christ.

*IV. Good liturgy facilitates engagement*.

If liturgy is the public work, the *leitourgia*, of all the baptised, then one of its qualities is that it facilitates people taking part in the activity, seeks to involve as many as possible, and finds ways to express particular skills and viewpoints. This is something that is grasped intuitively by many who have had had to build a team, and grasped in liturgies with particular groups (e.g. children), but this should be a conscious element in all liturgy planning. For generations a primary skill imparted in clerical training was that of implementing the rubrics; in our culture, a primary presiding skill is facilitating and encouraging the engagement of each person there. It is a skill whose importance was implicitly recognised in Vatican II, but is not yet embedded in our self-perception.

*V. Good liturgy is inclusive*.

A basic 'move' in ritual is that of dividing: clean from unclean, sacred from profane, holy from unholy, 'them' from 'us.' These notions have all too often been imported, both consciously (imagining liturgy in temple terms as exemplified in the language we use) and unconsciously (as in notions of impurity and purification), into Christian worship. But here lies one of the great discontinuities between the kerugma and religious consciousness: the Christ has overcome the divisions (Gal 3:28), the curtain of the temple has been torn asunder (Mk 15:38), and all the baptised form a priestly people (1 Pet 2:9). Our liturgy proclaims that we are one in Christ (1 Cor 10). So if dividing is part of our liturgical assemblies, we may be responding to our unconscious, but not to the gospel.

No one from among the baptised should go away from a liturgy feeling that she/he was excluded, 'cut off' or estranged: when that happens the fundamental dynamic of the liturgy as a celebration of reconciliation has been fatally compromised. Yet all too often the most felt perception of individuals at a liturgy is that of exclusion: due to theological tradition, sexual orientation, marital status, or a sense that a liturgy is the property of a particular group. If that is the perception then the liturgy has failed for that individual, and if that perception has a basis in the behaviour of the larger group then their liturgy has become a counter-sign to the gospel of love.

*VI. Good liturgy is based in the creation*.

In our rituals we are wont to imagine that we wholly leave the creation in liturgy and enter a celestial realm with but tenuous links to the world of our humanity or the material creation. We claim to be taking part in a banquet, but the merest modicum of a foodstuff is sufficient to be a spiritual vehicle; we claim to reside in the world made through the Logos but use a language that shuns the earthy and familiar as somehow unworthy of the sacred. By contrast, if our whole humanity has been redeemed, then our human situation – such as the human desire to share meals – should form the basis of our formal liturgy.

*VII. Good liturgy highlights the marginalised*.

It is easy for ritual to divorce itself from the lived reality of our own messy lives and suffering humanity. When this happens it is no longer the public work of those who are committed to conveying liberation and redemption but has become the refuge from reality. The paradigm example of this is the fact that at the early eucharistic banquets there was a collection among the gathering for the poor who were not there. While the collection as a practice has remained, its focus has been subverted from care of the needy to support of the clergy and the administration: but a genuine expression of care for the poor should be part of every celebration. In so far as all Christian liturgy needs to proclaim the absolute generosity of God, this must take material expression in human generosity. Moreover, that generosity cannot be limited to providing resources for the poor – a minimal and constant requirement – but must show the community actively relating to all who find themselves marginalised. Just as embracing all such marginalised people must be part of discipleship (Mt 25:31-40), so it must be a felt part of liturgy that claims to celebrate discipleship and proclaim the redemption.

*VIII. Good liturgy avoids clutter*.

By its nature, ritual is open to endless interpretations: liturgy is akin to poetry rather than prose. But that does not mean that we should not make a conscious effort to avoid conveying incorrect messages or so overloading our ritual communication that it ends up as 'everything is the same as everything else.' An essential part of ritual is communication and it should be capable of saying something about the Christian vision to every participant. But consider a liturgy at Christmas time when directly in front of the eucharistic table is located the crib scene, near it is still to be found the Paschal Candle, and near it is a small baptismal font, and the whole building is arranged in the oblong shape of an old-fashioned theatre rather than for a community celebration around the table of the Lord. The overload of messages means that only by a conscious action of critical reflection can one focus on the activity and the time without a mass of peripheral concerns.

Each liturgy should have its own clear focus, avoiding extraneous matter that fosters confusion, and speak in as simple and direct a manner as possible. We are there in response to a revelatory insight, not engaged in a crossword puzzle. In seeking to be true to its purpose it helps to generate a sense of integrity and honesty.

*IX. Good liturgy is expressive of our specific identities*.

One of the great claims of the pre-conciliar liturgy was that it was, from Canton to Connemara, just the same down to the last comma! The obverse was that it was as much out of touch with Connemara as with Canton – and indeed with what most Christians were doing for the past millennium. But we all have a sense of our individual and group identities; and these are not 'givens' fixed in some cultural DNA but are complex and evolving. With all the baptised we may share the identity of 'Christian' but with those taking part with me in a particular

liturgy I may share several other identities. This implies that the liturgy should be specific and local as much as it is ecumenical and universal.

If liturgy is to be *our* worship, really located in and coming from us as a community, then specific identity is at the heart of what we are doing. It must come from us as a community of faith who seek out the Way in our particular, created situation. Just as the notion of incarnation generates the awareness that we are the presence of the Christ in the particular, of time and situation, so our worship needs to reflect this, its joys and fears, needs and challenges. Liturgy is invariably a 'barometer' of our discipleship: good liturgy should reflect all that is best in a culture, and challenge what is oppressive.

*X. Good liturgy is 'open.'*

The heart of the Christian message, as of Judaism and Islam, is the infinity of that which we call 'God.' We express this in any number of theological shorthands: God is 'one'; creation is *ex nihilo*; only God is absolutely generous; or by asserting that absolute non-mutuality between creator and creation. A god who is an object in the universe is not the God of Abraham, Jesus, or Mohammed.

The danger of imagining that 'we have God' is ever present. The way we celebrate must assert our awareness that *God is always greater* - and that the liturgy never has 'a control' on the divine: 'The wind blows where it wills … so it is with everyone born of the Spirit' (Jn 3:8).

*Assessing liturgy and 'ticking boxes'*

A good liturgy cannot be measured in a finite way. So assessing a liturgy is not a matter of 'ticking boxes' or grading performance. Conversely, a poor liturgy is easier to assess: one sees people departing with messages encoded within the ritual which are often diametrically opposed to the gospel or after having an experience whose is anything but the liberating lightness of encountering love. These principles are intended as both a practical guide and as a stimulant to further reflection on how liturgy can tell our story to ourselves, help us affirm our vision of life and of the world, and model our perception of the boundaries of the Kingdom.

Further reading:
Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Rites and Wrongs of Liturgy: Why Good Liturgy Matters* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2018).